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ABSTRACT

An instructor is interested in the ways that ethical inquiry can shed light on theoretical and practical concerns that are raised by composition's interest in postmodernism and cultural studies, specifically in whether difference can be negotiated while still allowing for rhetorical agency. Inquiry into ethics and composition can offer a new perspective on this question. One common way to face classroom challenges when students sometimes write about violence they face and questionable practices they engage in (for example, a student who advocated marijuana use) is to consider what words of wisdom composition theory may offer. Dennis Lynch in "Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation" encourages teachers to challenge the argument model by conceiving of argument as a process of "agonistic inquiry" which "includes moments of conflict and agonistic positioning as well as moments of understanding and communication." Lynch suggests that teachers can promote this understanding of argument in the classroom by having students study one complicated issue all semester long, deferring the traditional position paper as long as possible by involving students in writing and classroom activities that enhance knowledge and sensitivity about the issue. The problems of personal essays really seem to be related to modern conceptions of ethics and subjectivity. Ethical issues in the classroom can be tied to these modern views, which suggests that study in ethics and composition may shed some light on issues of responsibility and authority in the composition classroom. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Why Study Ethics and Rhetoric?

Recent scholarship on the issue of ethics and composition has offered a variety of answers to the question: why study ethics and rhetoric? The works of Sandra Stotsky and David Harrington suggest that creating a connection between composition and ethics can provide writing teachers an avenue for encouraging critical thinking while also introducing students to the "good citizen" requirements of academic discourse (129, 13). Patricia Bizzell, in a later article, suggests that an interest in writing and ethics stems from a desire that writing teachers have for a sense of moral empowerment that is not at odds with their sense that "the imposition of ideological agendas...is morally questionable" (1). When I tell my colleagues that I am interested in writing and ethics, they too tend to be concerned with issues of good citizenship and/or moral empowerment and often ask me about the "ethics" of dealing with student plagiarism or student absences.

However, these aren't the connections I have in mind when I say I am interested in ethics and writing or ethics and rhetoric. What I really mean is that I am interested in the ways that ethical inquiry can shed light on theoretical and practical concerns that are raised by composition's interest in postmodernism and cultural studies. This interest may sound like a heady one for someone who teaches four writing classes a semester at an urban campus with over

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worked teachers and students as well as occasionally under prepared students. However, I don't see my work in this way. My work revolves around challenging interactions that I have had with my students, and colleagues.

Specifically, I am interested in the question: how can difference be negotiated while still allowing for rhetorical agency? While this paper will not necessarily answer this question, it will consider the ways that inquiry into ethics and composition can offer a new perspective on these questions. Before considering how ethical inquiry and rhetoric works at answering this question, I want to offer a classroom case that may help to contextualize the importance of the question I have raised.

In a developmental writing class a few semesters ago, I had a student, who, despite my encouragement to write on another topic, wrote a paper attempting to persuade other students to use marijuana based on his own many "satisfying and helpful" experiences. My gut reaction to this piece of writing was that the student who wrote it had a drug problem. However, after discussions with other teachers and my supervisor, I felt bound by institutional pressures to limit my comments to the quality of his writing. While I did manage to fit in some of my ethical concerns by turning my attention to the way the piece addressed the writer's audience, in the end, myself and the student felt alienated by our respective teacher and student roles.

I selected this case to work with because it is representative of common problems I have faced in the composition classroom. However, it is important to note that this case is not necessarily unique to my teaching practices. Dan Morgan in a recent College English article entitled "Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing" describes several cases of violence

students face and how such violence has found its way into the essays students write. He has received essays in which students have admitted to illegal activities such as shoplifting, drug use, and even murder. He has also received essays about a variety of personal and traumatic events including having an abortion and being abused. His work suggests that not only is my case not unique but that given the culture our students are now living in, such cases are going to become more and more common.

One common way to face classroom challenges like the ones Morgan and I describe is to consider what words of wisdom composition theory may offer. In my case the problematic paper is an argumentative essay. Some might argue, then, that my student's and my conceptions of argument are related to the difficulties I describe. Work by Dennis Lynch et al. in the CCC's essay "Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation" might suggest that my challenges in the classroom are a result of my student's competitive, and possibly alienating, conception of argument.

In the competitive argument model, Lynch et al. note that students tend to take pro or con positions about "big issues" like abortion rights or gun control (61). Through the process of writing, Lynch et al. note that the students tend to "cling to their original positions" and frequently lack "any real knowledge of the issue at hand as anything more than a pointless argument among people who do not care very much about the outcome -- except that it is always better in the classroom as in many other areas, to be on the winning rather than losing side" (61).

Lynch et al. note that we shouldn't blame our students for having such attitudes about argument especially since students are routinely exposed to these attitudes through shows like Cross Fire or Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show. Rather, Lynch et al. encourage us to challenge this model by conceiving of argument as a process of "agonistic inquiry" which "includes

moments of conflict and agonistic positioning as well as moments of understanding and communication" (63).

Lynch et al. suggests that teachers can promote this understanding of argument in the classroom by having students study one complicated issue, like water rights, all semester long. Lynch et al. then defer the traditional position paper as long as possible by involving students in writing and classroom activities that enhance students' knowledge and sensitivity about the issue. By emphasizing argument as inquiry, Lynch et al. hope to help students understand that argument is a "means of coming to decisions, a way of getting things done in the world that includes moments of agonistic dispute, moments of inquiry, moments of confrontation, and moments of cooperation" (84).

In contrast to my argument case, Morgan links his classroom difficulties to the personal essay. He cites the work of Valentino which suggests that cases of personal revelations should be expected because "the intimate nature of writing itself may serve as both a stimulus and a catharsis for past experiences" (qtd. in Morgan 321). Morgan notes that to deal with such inevitable confessions "Valentino provides indispensable advice in her article, from using reflective statements ("This must have been horrible for you"), through specific ways of keeping one's professional distance and setting limits, to networking actively with the school's support service specialists" (321). Morgan, himself, also offers advice about how to deal with such difficulties. He suggests emphasizing purpose and audience often and thoroughly (322) -- a technique I used in response to the marijuana paper. He also suggests insisting on tightly assigned topics and/or referring students to counseling when they write about a personal crisis (322, 323).

In both Morgan's case and mine, composition theory tends to link these problems with

student relevations to a limited or troubling conception of a particular writing genre that exists in many introductory composition classrooms -- the argumentative essay and/or the personal essay. However, work in communitarian and postmodern ethics would suggest that my problems and Morgan's are related to something much more fundamental than writing genres -- they are related to modern conceptions of ethics and subjectivity.

Before considering what this work says about the difficulties referred to by Morgan and me, it is important to define the terms "subject" and "agent." The term "subject" in this paper refers to the way personhood gets constructed by a particular theoretical, social, political, economic and/or cultural lens. That means, as Paul Smith points out in Discerning the Subject that a the word "subject" really refers to a variety of subject positions (xxxv). Also, the term "subject" can "always be conceived as being subject to something" (Smith xxxiv). It is this subject that subjectivity theory considers.

The term "subject," however, should not be confused with the term "agent." Paul Smith notes that a "person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them or not" (xxv). In other words, myself and Smith believe that people are capable of action and choices, and when a subject acts or resists, he or she is no longer a subject but an agent.

Even so, the modern subject often poses quite a challenge to agency. Paul Smith argues that this is so because traditional notions of the subject found in Descartes, Locke, Hume, Hegel, Heidegger, and Sartre have typically created a subject that is "construed epistemologically as the counterpart to the phenomenal object and is commonly described as the sum of sensations or 'consciousness' by which and against which the external world can be posited" (xxvii). In other words, the modern subject is the constitutor of the modern world.

Critiques of the modern subject raised by communitarian Seyla Benhabib and postmodern Zygmunt Bauman consider the troubling consequences such a subject can have on agency by considering the ways such a conception relies on an episteme of reduction and domination thus fragmenting moral agency and responsibility.

The modern subject's a priori status provides it with not only consciousness, but this conception also offers the subject a sense of ahistorical autonomy. Seyla Benhabib relates the modern subject's a priori status to a philosophical move that she calls "loss of the world" (205). She explains:

> Modern philosophy began with the loss of the world. The decision of the autonomous bourgeois subject to take nothing and no authority for granted whose content and strictures had not been subjected to rigorous examination, and that had not withstood the test of 'clarity and distinctness,' began with the withdrawal from the world. (205-206)

This withdrawal from the world, according to Benhabib, begins in Descartes work and is justified through stoicism (Benhabib 206).

Since the "loss of the world" separates the subject from the world, the project of philosophers from Descartes to Kant, according to Benhabib, has been to discover "how to make congruous order of representations in consciousness with the order of representations outside the self" (206). Modern philosophy, as Benhabib points out, has offered two answers to this question: empiricism and rationalism (206). Empiricism, in the modern tradition, assumes that knowledge can be gained and representations made congruous through "direct and immediate" evidence from the senses while modern rationalism assumes that the creator of the world (God?) is rational and thus there exists a natural "harmony" between the mind and nature which guarantees a correspondence between the "two orders of representations" (206).

Benhabib sees both empiricism and rationalism as attempts to "get back the world" (205),

and it is this desire to get the world back the leads to the modern focus on representation. Specifically, the modern project of representation concerns itself with the "ordering of representations in our consciousness," the selection of signs through which these representations could be made public, and the denotative workings of language (Benhabib 206). The preoccupations with representation leads modern conceptions of the subject to rely on three very significant assumptions: "a spectator conception of the knowing self," a designative theory of meaning, and a denotative theory of language" (206).

These three epistemic assumptions mark a modern tendency to bring order to one's consciousness and the world via a reduction of complexities in the subject and language. According to Benhabib, this reduction allows for control, and marks the modern episteme as one of domination (Benhabib 207). The modern desire to reduce complexity is marked by two other important philosophical moves. One move Benhabib labels as the "state of nature metaphor" which suggests that the subject man began out of nothing, and rose out of the wilderness alone as a noble savage. The other move Benhabib refers to as the "generalized other." This move allows for the moral claim that "each and every individual as a rational being [is] entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves" (158). The subject's relationship with the other is characterized by rights, obligations and entitlement -- all of which are interactions related to modern moral conceptions of justice (158).

The state of nature metaphor's denial of dependence allows for autonomy but also leads to narcissistic consequences; a subject "who sees the world in his own image; and who cannot see himself through the eyes of another" (Benhabib 156). Not only is the modern subject

autonomous and narcissistic, but as Benhabib points out, he is also "disembedded and disembodied" by the principle of generalization (157).

The modern subject's construction as a disembedded, disembodied, ahistorical and autonomous self with the capacity for domination is not altered even by some traditional theories, like Hegel's, that create a dialectic between the subject and the object (world). The Hegelian subject, according to Jeffery Nealon, does not seek "monologic unity," rather this subject wants to escape the trap of unity by seeking a continuous variety of "knowledge-gathering adventures of experience" (130). This subject, according to Nealon, uses the other to know the self and is caught in a continuous series of Odyessian adventures in which the subject is continually "'consummating' others while scrupulously keeping itself from being consummated" (Nealon 138). This subject's formula, then, can be expressed as: "I desire (to appropriate), therefore I am" (Nealon 130).

The Odyessian nature of Nealon's enlightenment subject founds what Zygmunt Bauman sees as modern ethics bureaucratic power. According to Bauman, modern ethics try to fulfill moral agents' desire for certainty by relying on an "exacting division of labor" (18). Bauman goes on to note that most tasks in our culture involve many people -- in fact the "quantity of people involved is so huge that no one can reasonably and convincingly claim...the 'authorship' of or the responsibility for the end result" (18). The modern subject can simply move in and out of each role -- experiencing a new adventure each time -- without ever becoming the role itself. The potential for constant movement creates a 'floating' sense of responsibility which is further complicated by how our entire lives are fragmented by the variety of "roles" which we play.

Bauman explains:

> In each setting we merely appear in a 'role,' one of many roles we play. None of the roles seems to take hold of our 'whole selves;' none can be assumed to be identical with what we truly are as 'whole' and 'unique' individuals. As individuals we are irreplaceable. We are not, however, irreplaceable as players of any of our many roles. (19)

The fragmentation Bauman describes is not purely theoretical. We can use this notion to understand the marijuana case that I started the paper with. In that particular case, I avoided responding to the student based on my moral chagrin about the student's drug use and careless attitude. Instead, I stuck to playing what I saw as my "neutral" writing teacher role which is exactly what my supervisor, two other writing teachers, and I thought was appropriate.

In this case, we don't see responsibility shifting so much from the individual to the role as we do see a limiting of responsibility based on the role. While as an individual I may have felt a need to do more, my subject position as a teacher made it clear that teaching writing was all I was suppose to do.

In the end, both the student and I felt alienated. The student, even though my comments were based on the quality of the writing and not its content per se, felt alienated because he wanted to write what he wanted to write and not be constrained by the requirements of the course or his role as a student. I felt alienated because I felt that my role as a writing teacher prevented me from doing "good" in the world. The irony of our responses, is that, according to Bauman, modernism uses a division of labor to help satisfy desires for agency and responsibility (19), but in this situation those desires were not fulfilled.

Modernism attempts to fulfill these desires for agency and responsibility, according to

Bauman, by seeking the "reduction of pluralism and the chasing away of moral ambivalence" (20). By reducing pluralism, modernism not only homogenizes subjects' lives, but it also seeks to offer the moral subject a sense of moral guidance and certainty. In some ways the modern project has worked, all three teachers in this instance knew what our role was suppose to be, and I knew, even before asking, how I was suppose to respond to the student's paper. The student also was well aware of what he was "suppose" to do in the course. Yet, the rigid division of labor promoted by a modern view of the subject also raises the specter of moral ambiguity while it tries to squelch it because in the end, modernism does not give agency and responsibility to the moral agent; it gives this authority to a subject role.

By relegating agency to subject roles or if you will subject positions, the modern subject is always only a subject, and never an agent. Agency requires a self-critical awareness of ones subject position, and the subject only becomes an agent when he/she uses this critical awareness to resist, identify with, adjust, or respond to a subject position. Modernism's division of labor assumes that the role or subject position is a desirable one to fill and offers no room for self-critical awareness of these roles. Modernism's conception of the subject can even be said to offer an impoverished notion of agency by conceiving of agency as an aspect of the subject -- not a property of a subject becoming an agent.

What I have tried to illustrate by considering one classroom case is that inquiry into ethics and writing is important because it can help us understand how and why ethical issues in the classroom pose such troubling difficulties for writing teachers. In this particular instance, work in both communitarian and postmodern ethics reveal that ethical issues in the classroom

can be tied to modern views of ethics and the subject. This finding suggests that study in ethics and composition may shed some light on issues of responsibility and authority in the composition classroom. This is why I study ethics and rhetoric.

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